An Expelled East German Dissident Explains the Peace Movement (July 21, 1983)

Abstract

In an interview in *tageszeitung*, a leftist West Berlin daily, the expelled Jena dissident Roland Jahn describes the East German peace movement: its motivations, activities, and hopes for the future. The movement aimed to end the nuclear arms race and to create space for political alternatives within the GDR.

Source

"Personally, I am Not a Pacifist"

Why is the GDR bureaucracy so allergic to the autonomous peace movement that, as we saw in your case, it doesn't even stop short of forced expulsion? The Peace Community [Friedensgemeinschaft] in Jena also supports the official government proposals. So where's the problem for the GDR?

Jahn: The problem is that we don't hold back, that we put our ideas into practice, delve into what takes place in daily life. And there we see the contradiction between the militarism in social life and the officially pronounced desire for peace. The state authorities think that this movement could produce something that calls the entire social structure into question. The system is set up in a way that disciplines people and takes away their right to make decisions, just like in the military: orders—obedience. There's no democracy but rather a despotic militarism. And we're turning against militarism, militarism all over the world, and so of course we start here at home, where we feel it every day, and we point it out. In doing so, we debunk the official peace pronouncements and thus become dangerous. Threats and restrictions are felt everywhere, but they don't always express themselves outwardly. The movement itself is everywhere inside the people. But when someone breaks ranks publicly, more and more people find courage and suddenly realize how restricted they are, how little say they have, and they start to express themselves and resist things. This generates movement and the authorities want to counteract that. But it's not that we're protesting just for the sake of opposition. We simply want peaceful coexistence with respect for the individual and for human dignity, the kind of conditions under which an individual can develop fully.

What role does the church play for [all of] you?

The Protestant church in the GDR contributes significantly in that it gives autonomous peace work a chance to develop at all. Of course, there are lots of problems that go beyond the scope of the present conversation. But just a short remark: the conflicts we had in Jena led to our going public as a peace community, independent of state and church, for the first time.

I'm thinking of the Pentecost meeting of the FDJ [Free German Youth], of the striking television images. What is this thing that presents itself as the "official" peace movement? Is it only bureaucratically decreed mobilizations?

Yes, on the one hand, that's what it is. But I don't deny that the people who attend those gatherings have genuine emotions. It's a very natural thing to oppose the NATO Dual-Track Decision.

The forms in which protests happen are prescribed. But other things come into play as well. It's a

Pentecost youth meeting and there's everything that accompanies that, having a good time and so on. . . . You could certainly say that some people are manipulated, but most of them are just speaking out for the cause of peace. The problem is that no one is allowed to go beyond the officially prescribed slogans. Western depictions sometimes make it look as though everything here were decreed, for example: "maybe they aren't even against it." That's nonsense. I don't know anyone in the GDR who supports the NATO Dual-Track Decision. Because when a weapon is aimed at you, you don't support that weapon being aimed at you. And the Pershing II weapons are aimed at us in the GDR.

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To what extent are the autonomous peace circles an isolated group in the GDR? Do they radiate outward into the rest of society, into organizations like the FDJ, for example?

What is understood as autonomous peace work is supported predominantly by the Protestant church. And from there it radiates outward into the general population; there are, after all, many Christians.

With respect to those of us in Jena—and we also worked outside of the church—the reaction was quite varied. First of all, it was noticed. I'd like to mention three public actions: the moment of silence on Christmas, the rally on the anniversary of the bombing of Jena, and the FDJ peace demonstration on Pentecost Day. (For us, the content aspect of our work is also important, but I'll explain that in a minute.) During public actions, there's definitely a radiation outward into the population. The term "population" is actually too broad, since it's mostly the cheering types [*die Jubler*] who go to the official rallies; the broad masses don't really come out, except for the FDJ, since it's mandatory for them. But many of the 15 to 16-year-olds in the FDJ are looking for something new, and they're open to engaging with all kinds of ideas.

At the moment of silence on Christmas the population noticed that something was going on because of the large number of security forces. Some people say, "oh, they're crazy"; others participate in slandering us: they say that we're anti-social. But a large segment knows what it's all about and what we're protesting. They know, but they still say there's no point in protesting— because that's the attitude of the opposition in the GDR, to say there's no point. And another group of people say: that should be supported, what they're doing is good.

Do people talk about it, say, at work?

Yes, of course, whenever it becomes public, whenever the security forces strike down hard. Here's one very clear example. In November a moment of silence was held. Afterwards, passersby spoke with the participants; there were small group discussions. And then it was over. Then another moment of silence was supposed to be held on December 24, but a large number of security forces and combat groups, etc., were on hand. Although the moment of silence didn't take place, because it was prevented, it immediately became the talk of the town in Jena. And then there was our rally on March 18. We came in with posters and were beaten up. News of it spread everywhere immediately.

So on Pentecost Day we were tolerated in some places; people engaged with us. In a very cautious way, of course, but at least they made an attempt. Then our posters were torn down again and a few discussions started, there was a large group of very young FDJ youths standing around and some of them said, "yeah, we're on your side." And in Schwerin some FDJ youths picked up posters of ours that had been torn down. At these moments, you can feel the movement, you can feel what's going on inside people and that it's mostly a matter of getting the word out. For us it was the same thing. We didn't stop with the demand for disarmament; rather, we also saw the contradictions in everyday life. This becomes the main issue the moment you delve deeper, the moment you don't just say, yes, there are missiles that they're aiming at us, but when you precisely analyze everything that threatens us. You see that the things

happening in our army don't advance education toward peace. The same is true for what's being taught in school in military training, and this also extends to war toys; that's where you have to start. But of course it's the missiles that are most visible. But then you come far enough to realize that this militarization characterizes certain life patterns: subordination, not having a say, and then you develop yourself further. You're no longer concerned just with disarmament, but also with democratic freedoms, with human rights.

What role does the call for unilateral disarmament play for [all of] you in the GDR?

There are different opinions. I personally think that disarmament has to occur on both sides, but you have to set an example at each step along the way; you have to take measures that make the other side follow suit.

Would you make this demand in the GDR? Even though you have a very clear position on NATO's attempt to catch up in the arms race?

Yes, you have to take steps that set an example. All the calculations about weapons potential is nonsense; that's why I don't pay too much attention to balancing one side against the other. I don't regard the talks in Geneva as senseless but rather as fruitless. For that reason, disarmament that cuts across blocs and proceeds from the bottom up is becoming more and more important, and ways to achieve this need to be found. That's where the exchange of ideas is important, as is the willingness of individuals to adopt a stance of resistance. Those in power in the East and West have no interest in disarmament. The one earns his profits in the armaments industry; the other needs militarism and armaments to maintain the power structures. Not only power for power's sake in a psychological sense, but also in a concrete, material sense, since everyone here is anchored in this military system. The officers or those who have good positions in the arms industry are earning well. They're making profits—in a different way than in capitalism, namely, through their position in the hierarchy of the system. The officer, the general who carries the sword, golden and gleaming, and who has a good life—he's not eager to pull a ploughshare and sweat. That's why he won't support the slogan "swords into ploughshares."

This is why the peace movement always has to be driven forward from the grass roots. People have to refuse to go along with the system. Put in a totally naïve way: there won't be any missiles if no missiles are produced. And who produces them? Workers. That's where we have to start, and there I think the question of unilateral disarmament is good. To start unilaterally with yourself: don't go into the army, don't produce armaments or [war] toys, contribute to teaching peace, starting with very simple things. Wars cannot be prevented by preparing for them, but rather by teaching peace.

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What effect did the events in Poland have on the GDR?

That was very complex. It generated a lot of hope, especially among the younger generation. A large segment of the peace movement sees itself as an alternative movement with respect to all aspects of society. The people are prepared to forego the normal path, careers, etc., simply because of the threat. Then that develops further into a drive to develop one's own personality, which is only possible under democratic conditions. And any change in this direction is of course welcomed. Poland was like the GDR: election results of 99 percent [for the Communist party]. And then suddenly the people learn to express themselves. That made a lot of people here optimistic and made it possible for people to feel hopeful for the GDR. On the other hand, of course, people saw that the GDR is not Poland. They are still doing well, in material terms, that is.

What will happen now in Jena? The Peace Community has lost a lot of its members.

There are enough people to continue the work. Although it is a community, and not an organization with a president, etc., there is still a structure there. We gave ourselves a concept. For us, peace is not the absence of war; rather, it is action that can be lived all the time in concrete situations. That also means trying to deal with the issues, having an effect on society. It's not that we're a bunch of people who just want to do spectacular things.

We began working in groups. Initially, the issue was the problem of militarism. Then came questions about its cause, where it started: in how we are raised and educated. So an education group formed. Then we asked ourselves: what else do we feel threatened by? Of course, the relationship between humanity and nature/the environment, so an ecology group formed. Then, many wound up in jail, were subjected to the arbitrariness of the state. They don't know the laws, so a group formed and concerned itself with legal problems. Or we asked ourselves, are we alone in the GDR? There are groups like this all over, we have to build up contacts and exchange information. Everyone contributed whatever they could to our work. That included artistic work. For example, we worked a lot with different photo techniques; we made postcards about peace and then sent them throughout the GDR.

All of that exists as before. Some people left, including some very significant individuals, but everything continues to exist. Even if we cannot determine quantitatively how many people belong to the peace movement, we know that there is something inside people, that the increasing arms build-up and militarization, the increasing violence by the state, and very concrete things like my expulsion, make a difference. So people are looking for ways to work together to do something to oppose the threat. That's how these communities will form, and new people will continue to find their way to them.

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